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Officials deny report KAL attack an error

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Senior administration officials are denying a published report that claimed U.S. intelligence analysts have concluded the Soviet Union did not know it was attacking a civilian airliner the night it shot down KAL Flight 007 over Soviet airspace.

The senior officials, who have routine access to the intelligence reports, added there has been no final assessment of the data and said that a conclusion having the effect of exonerating the Soviets was invalid.

The senior officials also charged that comments made Friday by the State Department on the report were "unauthorized" and that the department had not obtained "interagency approval," namely from the CIA or the White House, prior to making the statements.

The New York Times reported on Friday that a review of "all available evidence" had been concluded and that intelligence experts have "no indication that Soviet air defense personnel knew it was a commercial plane before the attack."

But the senior administration officials, who spoke on condition that they not be identified, characterized that report as either "a fabrication or a lie," and denied that "most intelligence analysts have reached that conclusion."

Based on a reading of the intelligence data thus far, one senior official said, "there is another assessment" of the overall picture, "and that is that the Soviets must have known they were shooting down a civilian airliner."

The official added that the evaluation of intelligence is continuing, and will do so until the aircraft's "black box," which contains recordings of the pilot's conversations and flight data, is accounted for.

The Washington Times also has learned that three weeks ago CIA Director William Casey, under presidential authority, circulated a detailed memorandum to officials at the State Department, Defense Department and White House

warning against any further public discussion of intelligence of assessments regarding the KAL incident.

Casey said that too much information on U.S. "sources and methods" of intelligence-gathering had already been revealed and that the time had come for it to cease.

Nevertheless, on Friday State Department spokesman Alan Romberg told reporters that U.S. analysts do "not know for sure" and "may never know" whether the Soviets knew they were shooting down a civilian airliner.

"We don't know for sure. How can we possibly know for sure? We have never said we did," Romberg said.

Romberg "had no business saying that," a senior administration official said. "(Secretary of State) George Shultz's people are not authorized to discuss details of intelligence assessments that are taken out of context and which contravene both administration and legal prohibitions against public discussion of intelligence sources and methods," the official charged, referring to the Casey memorandum.

"Taking such details out of context almost invariably leads to faulty analysis and incorrect intelligence assessments, especially when the broader context, which informs our overall assessment, indicates that the Soviets did know that they were shooting down a civilian airliner," the senior official charged.

Romberg yesterday declined to comment on any aspect of his statements, saying only, "I speak with the authorization I need to speak with."

White House officials, as well as some military analysts, suggest that there exists "political motivation" for putting out the story easing up on the Soviets. They maintain that certain factions within the State Department and within the intelligence community have been "pushing" the view from the beginning that the Soviets did not know the civilian nature of the aircraft.

They cite as one indication of this view a secret State Department cable sent to Seoul, South Korea, the day after the shootdown. The cable quotes the department's task force as being "convinced the Soviets were sure they were firing on an American military plane when they attacked the KAL aircraft." A copy of the document was obtained by The Washington Times.

The officials suggest that some State Department officials and others are overly concerned that the Reagan administration's accusations against the Soviets may lead to a further "chilling of relations" and block already "limited chances" for a Reagan-Andropov summit.

"The State Department apparently believes the American public must be protected from getting angry over Soviet criminal behavior because it fears such 'popular anger' could 'lead to war,'" one senior official mused.

Gen. George Keegan, former head of Air Force intelligence, said he believed the statements exonerating the Soviets were put forward based on "a conscious, political decision made somewhere to tone down the rhetoric to free the Soviet leaders from the responsibility" of shooting down the aircraft.

"I can't imagine what evidence they would have to come up with such a judgment," Keegan added.

The New York Times article claims that "most American intelligence experts" reached the conclusion that the Soviet SU-15 jetfighter "was below, and not parallel to, the South Korean 747." The distinction is important because the 747 has a distinctive silhouette clearly visible from the side, but not necessarily from below.

But Keegan, whose view was echoed by the current officials, said that assessment is faulty. "The translation of the voice intercepts make it crystal clear that the pilot flew abreast, then past the nose of the aircraft, then he pulled back to make the rocket run," Keegan said.

A senior administration official simply said the report of flying below and not alongside "was wrong, incorrect." He would not elaborate.